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United States
Department of
Agriculture

Food Safety
and Inspection
Service

Meat and
Poultry Hotline
Staff

Making the Connection: AN UPDATE

USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline, 1993



INTRODUCTION

The Meat and Poultry Hotline is a tollfree (800) telephone number established in 1985 to answer questions from the public on the safe storage, handling, and preparation of meat and poultry products. The hotline, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), is a convenient and friendly way for consumers with questions or problems related to meat and poultry, or foodborne illness, to get in touch with FSIS. A team of home economists, registered dietitians, and food technologists answer the hotline phones.

The hotline's history, mission, and day-to-day operations are described in *Making the Connection: USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline, 1992*. (While they last, single copies of that report may be ordered by writing U.S. Department of Agriculture, FSIS Publications Office, Room 1180-S, Washington, D.C. 20250.) This supplementary report covers 1993; it reviews the year's major accomplishments as well as new and emerging food safety issues.

MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Activities in Response to Western States Outbreak. In response to an outbreak of illness caused by a strain of bacteria, *E. coli* 0157:H7, USDA coordinated a public education campaign in which the Meat and Poultry Hotline took a very active part. The hotline's charge was to ensure that the public understood the importance of safe handling and proper cooking procedures for raw meat and poultry products.

The hotline responded by adding a recorded instructional message to the automated system (played more than 2,000 times), providing timely information to individual callers alarmed by the outbreak, releasing print and video news features on the safe handling of ground beef (the video went to at least 1,000 outlets), and booking interviews with local radio stations on food safety.

In addition, the hotline's facilities, equipment, and tollfree telephone number were used for a Pathogen Reduction Employee Call-In, which ran from March 18 to 23. During the call-in, agency officials encouraged suggestions from FSIS field employees on ways to reduce pathogens in meat and poultry. The comments received ran the gamut, from improved farming practices to consumer education.

Ready-Prepared Meals Campaign. Hotline calls indicated that ready-prepared meals were gaining in popularity and presented some challenging situations. Often, misinformation well-meaning food handlers and retailers provided put the purchaser, family and guests at risk for illness. To counter this, hotline staff set out to develop a brochure containing basic instructions for handling cooked turkey dinners, which seemed to be the most common ready-prepared meal.

Background work included both a literature search and communication with food scientists in academia, government, trade groups, grocery stores, cooperative extension, State health departments, and allied health fields. All those contacted agreed that specific consumer guidelines were needed.

Interested members of this group met in August 1993 to discuss the idea of a consumer-friendly brochure that could be ready for distribution before the holidays. With support from the working group, hotline staff developed a brochure with sections on frozen, refrigerated, and hot meals. The brochure was designed to allow any one of these sections to stand alone. Ten thousand reproducible masters were distributed across the country by the organizations involved. FSIS itself distributed approximately 3,500 brochures during the holidays.

Follow-up evaluation revealed that the information was widely used by trade associations, grocery stores, food editors, radio-TV interviewers and their guests, sales and marketing directors, wire and food syndicates, and extension agents. Inquiries to the hotline included about 100 calls related to ready-prepared holiday meals, an increase from 50 the previous year.

Future plans include revising the brochure to reflect changing marketplace trends. For example, a version of the brochure applicable to all carry-out foods may be developed.

Expanded Role as "Consumer Consultant" to USDA. Hotline staff and management presented the consumer viewpoint to a wide range of special interest groups within USDA. Committees consulting the hotline were working on projects such as a Department-wide toll-free employee helpline, Midwest flood relief, food irradiation education, pathogen control in processing, safe handling label instructions, and nutrition labeling/label education.

Media Placements. The Meat and Poultry Hotline's management staff responded to an average of 63 media calls each month, or 751 for the year. In this way, food safety information was shared with an audience much broader than the hotline's consumer callers.

After the tragic outbreak of illness in the Western States caused by the organism *E. coli* 0157:H7, the demand for consumer-friendly food safety information dramatically increased. In the first three quarters of the year, media calls increased 42 percent over the similar period in 1992. No fewer than 12 major magazines with a combined circulation of 33.5 million, including *Newsweek*, incorporated food safety information in articles after contact with the Meat and Poultry Hotline. The hotline was also noted as a source for basic nutrition information in the *Parade* weekend newspaper supplement (circulation 32 million).

Emergencies and Potentially Hazardous Situations. As in years past, the hotline received many calls from consumers who were without electricity and needed help deciding which foods, if any, should be kept. As usual, these calls peaked with major storms such as the March blizzard affecting much of the Eastern United States. The hotline also remained one source of information on voluntarily recalled meat and poultry products.

In 1993, the impact of Midwestern floods could be seen in one segment of these calls. There were approximately 60 calls for advice on flood-damaged foods, many more than in a typical year. Callers had two major concerns: which containers could be sanitized after submersion in flood waters and effects of flood-borne pollutants on growing crops. The Meat and Poultry Hotline provided basic guidelines and suggested sources of help in the affected localities.

On the Horizon. The hotline staff expects interest in food labeling to intensify in 1994 as safe handling instructions and new nutrition labels are rolled out. Agricultural biotechnology also promises to change the face of the food safety debate, as products such as recombinant bovine somatotropin (BST) gain wider acceptance and use.

HOLIDAY SEASON

Preparation. November and December remained the busiest months in the Meat and Poultry Hotline calendar. During the holiday season, many consumers are cooking larger quantities and entertaining more, and food editors often provide toll-free numbers in their articles. A variety of approaches were used to ensure that those who had safe handling questions were aware of the Meat and Poultry Hotline.

Work began in the spring with outreach to magazine editors. Closer to and during the month of November, hotline staff conducted 95 radio interviews and released three news features on the hotline service and various aspects of safe turkey preparation. Articles in the FSIS magazine *Food News for Consumers* and a print advertisement picked up by many newspapers displayed the hotline number. The hotline manager participated in a satellite media tour for television stations interested in airing food safety stories. She also appeared on a new cable channel devoted to food.

Educational efforts in December focused more on mail order meat and poultry products and buffet serving. Video news features on these topics were re-released. Two news features for the press, a USDA-produced radio interview, and an appearance by the hotline manager on local television closed out the year.

Nature of Calls. As expected, the vast majority of questions pertained to turkey dinners: guidelines for purchasing turkey, taking prepared foods to other sites, the safety of many cooking methods and recipes, and recommended storage times. Televised reports critical of poultry inspection evoked a modest response, as did FDA's final approval of BST and a regional advisory that oysters taken from contaminated beds had caused illnesses in the Southeast and Gulf States.

In December, these concerns were joined by questions on handling, hams, rib roasts, goose, food gifts sent or received, etc. Particular recipes calling for eggs were evaluated in terms of potential to cause salmonellosis.

STATISTICAL SUMMARY

Call Volume. The 131,317 calls into the system brought 1993's tally within 5 percent of the record mark set in 1992. The figure includes calls handled by food safety specialists and those handled by the automated hotline system (a menu-driven collection of recorded messages on a range of topics). It also encompasses calls made as part of the aforementioned Pathogen Reduction Employee Call-In.

Figures that follow are based on calls logged by hotline food safety specialists during regular business hours, a sample consisting of approximately 44,600 inquiries from 42,000 callers.

Audiences Reached. Primarily, the Meat and Poultry Hotline served individual consumers. The organization also supports educators, communicators, and providers of direct client service like dietitians. Thirteen percent of callers identified themselves as part of some specialized audience (see figure 1). (Media callers who contacted the hotline manager directly were not considered in the calculations for figure 1.)

The percentage of business callers rose slightly from 1992 to 4 percent, as did the proportion of professional callers. For the second consecutive year 28 percent of hotline users were repeat callers.

Callers' Home States. Sixty percent of hotline calls came from the Eastern United States (see figure 2), followed by the Central, Pacific, and Mountain regions. Calls came from all 50 States, the District of Columbia, and several foreign countries. New York, California, and Ohio were the top call producers.

Source of the Toll-Free Number. The means by which first-time callers learn of the Meat and Poultry Hotline stay fairly constant from year to year, with print media such as newspapers the most common. (See figure 3.)

Increasingly, publications other than periodicals are mentioning the Meat and Poultry Hotline. This segment gained 2 percentage points in 1993, due in large part to use of the number in several best-selling cookbooks.

Types of Inquiries. Fewer than 2 percent of customer contacts were identified as complaints about food products or government policies. Complaints of a general nature, referring to some condition in the marketplace, outnumbered formal agency-investigated complaints by more than 2 to 1.

Allegations of foreign objects were most frequent in the formal complaint category and alleged illnesses ranked second. Complaints about practices in a store or restaurant were most common among informal complaints.

Subject of Inquiry. Seventy percent of hotline inquiries reflect basic handling, storing, and cooking concerns (see figure 4). Among these, questions of storage and handling (freezing and thawing, refrigeration, shelf life, power failures, etc.) predominated.

Eighteen percent of inquiries dealt with more scientific, technical, and regulatory aspects of food protection. This segment included approximately 2,500 product recall questions. Callers also asked about meat and poultry inspection, basic nutrition, product content, dating and labeling, agricultural chemical use, food additives, cookware, and packaging.

Reports of unusual, unsatisfactory or faulty products, (including formal complaints, product appearance questions, etc.) accounted for 6 percent of hotline calls. Miscellaneous topics, some beyond the scope of the hotline, comprised the remaining 6 percent of questions.

Foods of Interest. Most inquiries (80 percent) were specific to a particular product or group of foods. Sixty-two percent of the product-specific questions applied to five product categories — turkey, chicken, beef, eggs, and pork. (See figure 5.) Turkey and chicken have topped the list for several years. Turkey questions prevailed around the holidays; in the summer months, when outdoor cooking is popular, callers were most interested in chicken.

Twenty-four percent of the questions, while related to specific foods, were more general and pertained to an assortment of foods or combination dishes.

Call Management. Questions beyond the hotline's purview are referred to the organization best able to handle them. Often these are matters that required action by the agency with legal jurisdiction or questions of a highly technical nature.

In 1993, 90 percent of callers' questions and concerns were handled by hotline food safety specialists.

Of the remaining inquiries, 3 percent were referred within FSIS, 1 percent to cooperative extension, 1 percent to the Food and Drug Administration, 1 percent to health departments, 1 percent to trade associations and industry councils, and 3 percent to other offices.

OPERATIONS

At present, the Meat and Poultry Hotline staff consists of the Director, a Public Affairs Specialist, one Management Analyst, one Supervisory Technical Information Specialist, and seven part-time and five temporary-intermittent Technical Information Specialists.

Hotline staff continue to fulfill numerous responsibilities in addition to answering consumer calls. To support the main mission of the hotline, staff members do research and develop reference materials. Each serves as a subject matter expert on specific topics, and in that capacity develops talking points to guide and standardize responses, in addition to keeping others abreast of new developments. The hotline also develops its own training materials and schedules in-service workshops as necessary. Finally, hotline staff are often asked to give speeches and presentations at conventions, professional meetings, and in a variety of other settings.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline, call 1-800-535-4555 (202-720-3333 in the Washington, D.C., area). Callers may speak with a food safety specialist weekdays from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Eastern time; recorded messages are available any time.

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To file a complaint, write the Secretary of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C., 20250, or call (202) 720-7327 (voice) or (202) 720-1127 (TDD).

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Figure 1: Audiences Reached, 1993

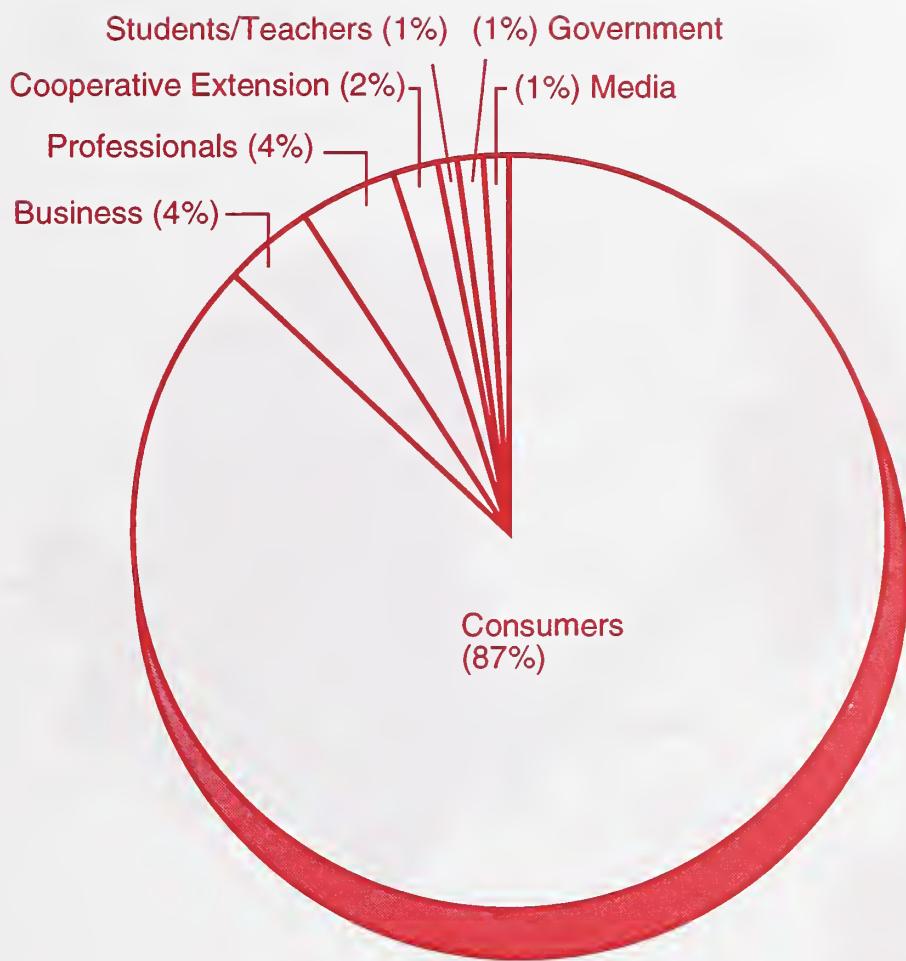


Figure 2: Hotline Callers' Home States, 1993

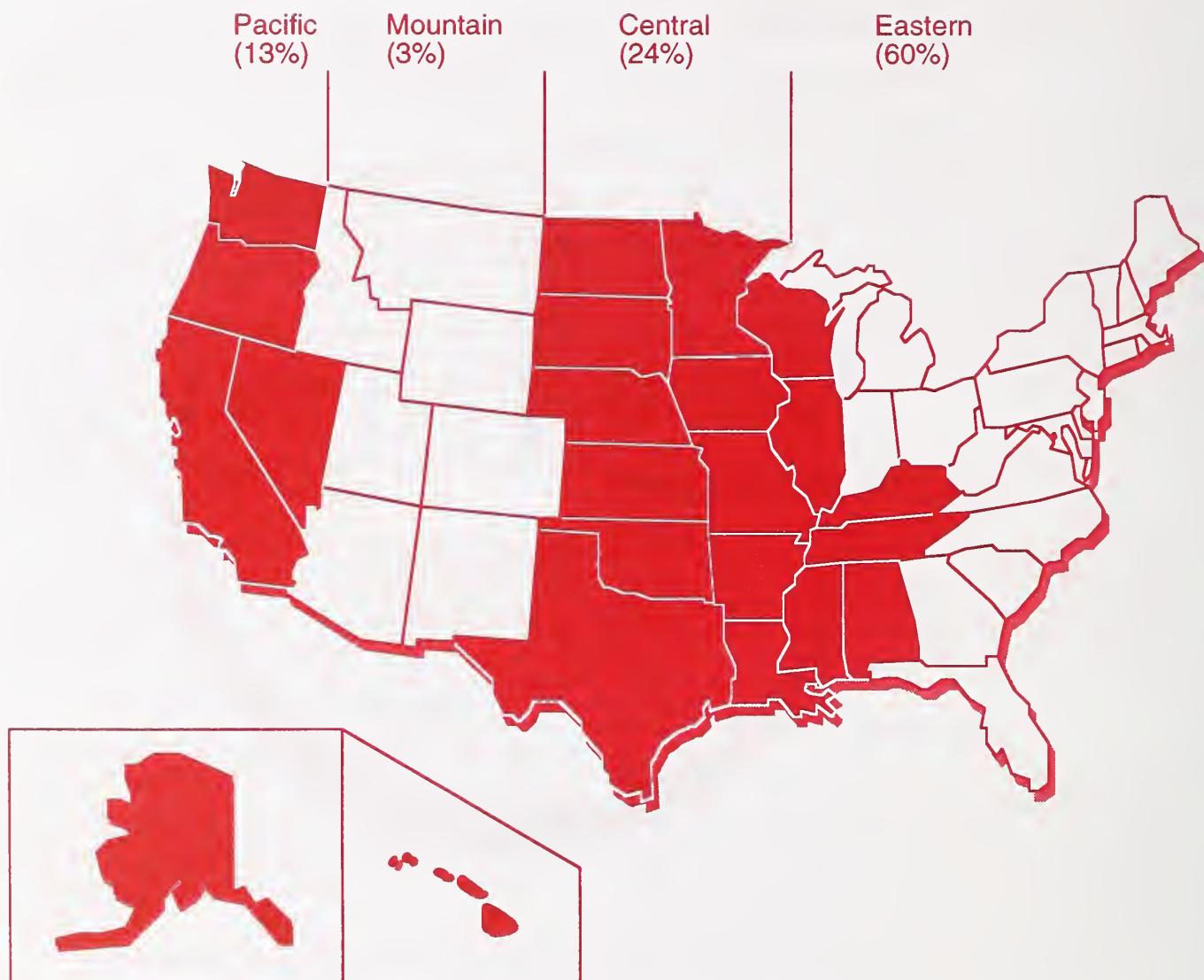


Figure 3: Source of Hotline Telephone Number, 1993: First Time Callers

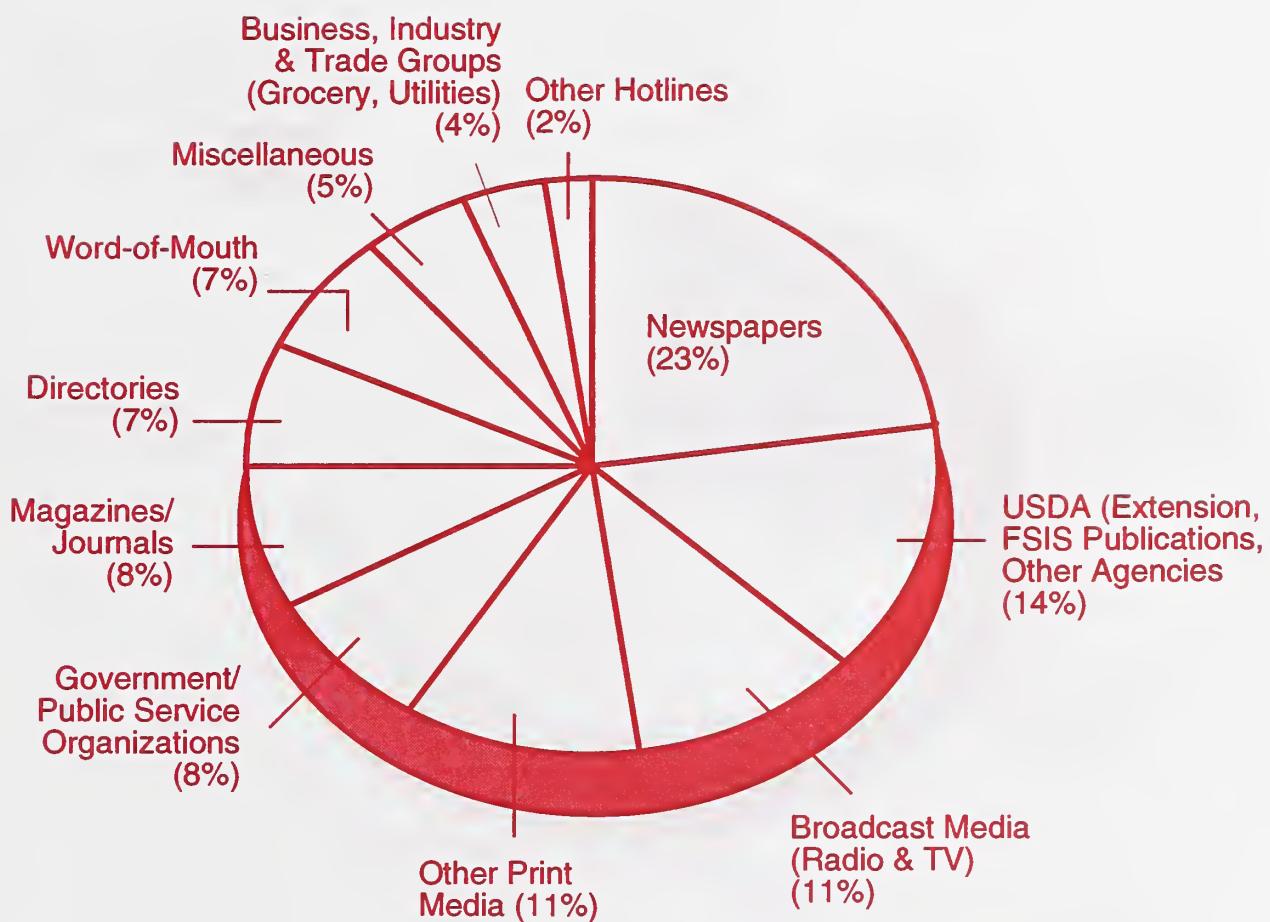


Figure 4: Subjects of Inquiry, 1993

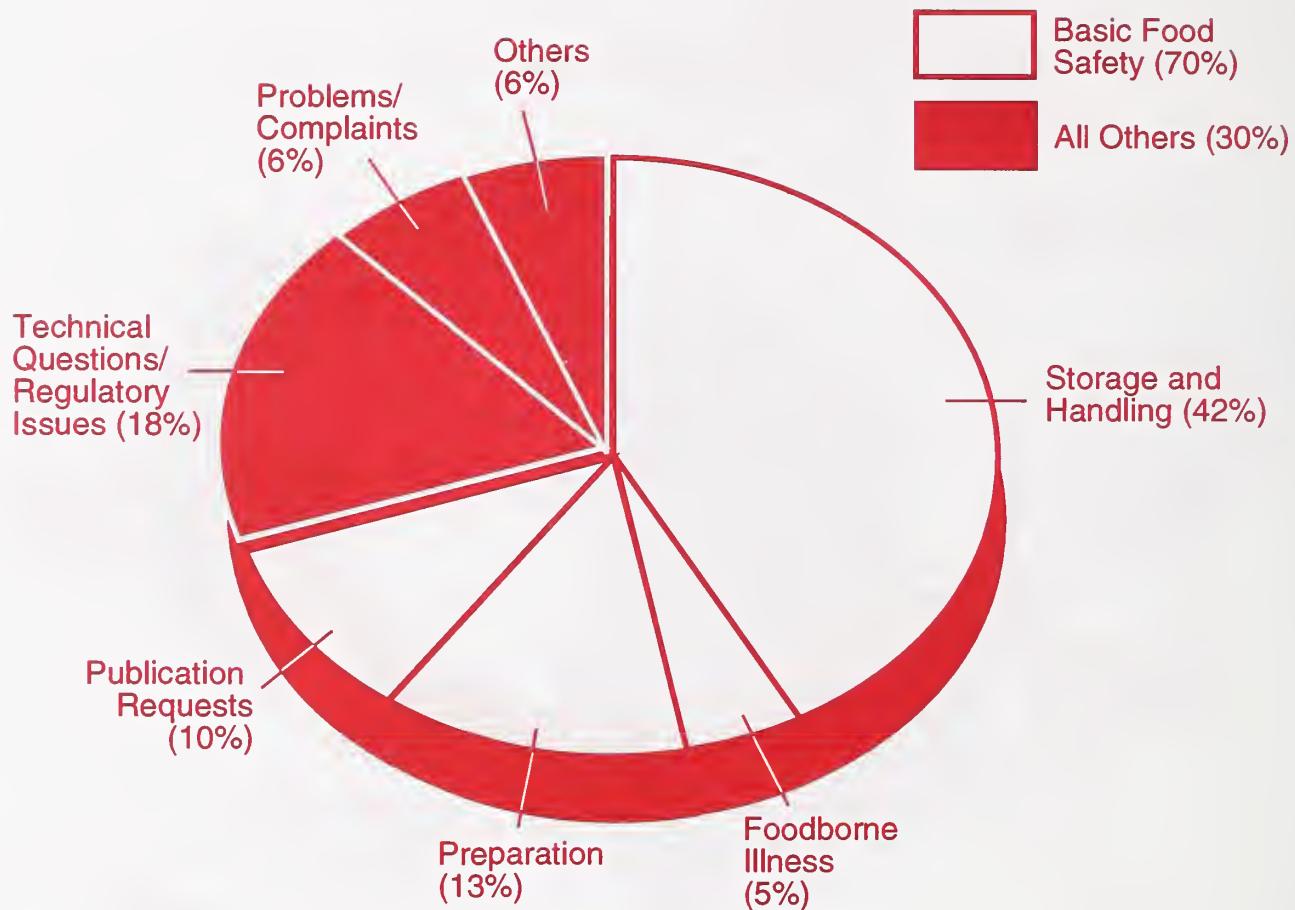
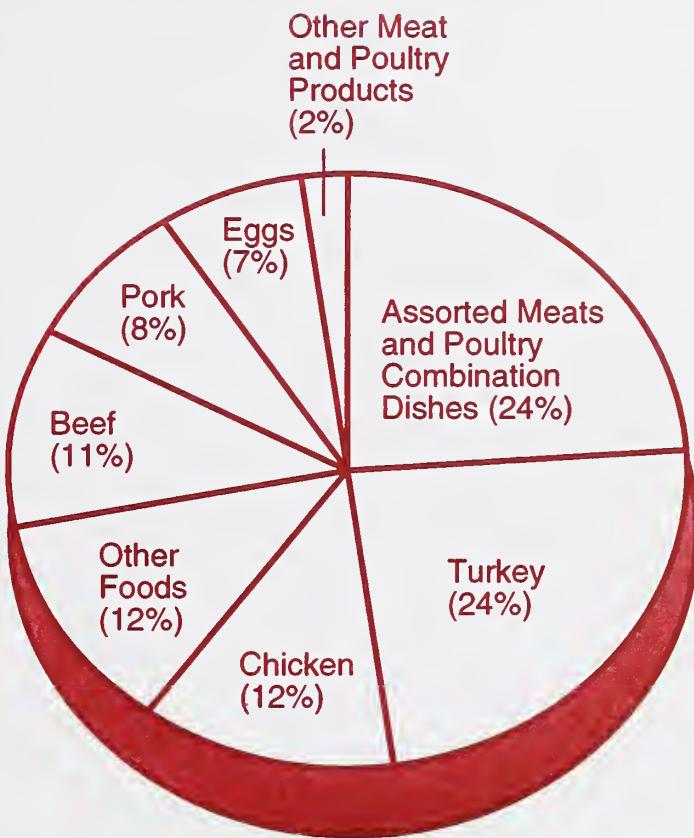


Figure 5: Foods of Interest, 1993:
Product-Specific Inquiries



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